



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON
3-23-14

Do you ever feel frustrated or tired of hearing about the divides, the walls, the separation between us and them? Whoever the us and them might be? It's easy to see it going on right now in our federal government today- or state government. But the same kind of situations are all around us. Always it seems there are "in" groups and "out" groups, the acceptable or right folks, and those who aren't. We find ourselves trying to decide how to negotiate the different groups, the factions – who to identify with, who to associate with. This dividing of loyalties, this separating from some people and hanging out with others – that whole dynamic in our lives takes us all right back to the word we have been exploring this season – Sin. Sin is about putting up dividing walls that shut off relationships with others. We separate or dismiss or alienate ourselves from one person all the way to whole groups of people. We sin.

And this sort of sin is serious business and it has been for a long time. Consider the gospel reading from John. The Samaritan woman said to Jesus, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) And boy, I guess that was really the truth of those times. And the reading goes on to tell of differences in the way Jews and Samaritans worshipped and that they separated from each other in where they lived – there were Samaritan towns and cities and then Jewish settlements.

In the Jerusalem temple, that holy place of worship for the Jews – as Jesus and the Samaritan woman said, only select people could go certain places. Its whole plan was to keep people out of where they were not allowed. The temple mount was a series of concentric courts, each one a little higher, representing a higher holiness, as you progressed inward. So, the larger, outermost court was where Gentiles, the non-Jews could pray. The next court inward was for Jewish women and children, closer still was the court for Jewish males over twelve year old. Then on the inside, only Jewish priests, those born of particular families-could enter, because it was the actual shrine of their faith. Finally, the inmost shrine the holy of holies, was entered by the chief priest once a year. And even though the temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed and rebuilt and is now shared with other faith traditions – the separation of peoples still continues at that site, unfortunately.

For that is not the witness and message that Jesus gave us. When he visits with the Samaritan woman at the well, he makes it clear that all will be changed. We will worship together in spirit and truth and there will not be divisions for all will worship together. All things are changed with the coming of the Messiah and all people are acceptable.

Paul also carries that message onward as he write further in Romans – “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, the same Lord is Lord of all....” And through Christ there are no more barriers, or dividing walls of hostility. The wall is down and God declared us to be all fellow citizens and family members and we become the holy temple in our own bodies. We are now the holy of holies as we are bound together in the new life that comes through Christ’s death and resurrection. We are one body and that body is holy as we all are one in worshipping and serving God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Place or race no longer matters- we worship in Spirit and in truth.

The temptation will remain around us to think in terms of us and them: saved and unsaved, liberal or conservative, evangelical or traditional, or Wyomingites and those who wish they were Wyomingites. It is troubling to think how easily we fall into creating divisions and separations. And sad to say, sometimes those separations occur because we are uncomfortable or uncertain about new situations and new people. We often choose to avoid, like the disciples of Jesus would have- we avoid talking to that woman at the well, she doesn’t matter to us. And we avoid talking to the weeping widow, the troubled youth released from jail, the morose man who will only whine about his ill health and his sad life, or the stranger that has arrived in town and looks rather unhealthy. But in Christ no distinctions remain. We must always tell ourselves that all people are valuable, all people are worthy of our attention, all people need help and support.

In a disciplined, trained, and organized manner, our Stephen Ministers are committing and sacrificing themselves to do what all of us are called to do. Stephen Ministers will care for people who are grieving, for people who have been betrayed or who at least have been let down by others or by life. They will help people consider more carefully the decisions they must now make. Through their serving they are declaring that what separates is gone and they become the holiest spot on earth, the place of living water.

Stephen Ministers will care for people whose spouses won’t seek help and for those whose spouses need all of their time and help. They care for people before and after surgery, before and after marriage, before and after childbirth, before, during and after divorce. In such service they are the holiest temple on earth, knowing with conviction that Love Heals Every Body.

Stephen Ministers care for those who will recover soon, for those who suffer from chronic problems and for those who teeter painfully between health and illness. They show God’s love to those who are dying and to those who are making so many changes they feel as though they are in the midst of new birth. In their caring service they show no separation between themselves and others. In serving, they are the holiest place on earth, the place where no one suffers alone.

Our faith and the place of living water will always involve service to the challenge of bringing peace and reconciliation, of uniting people and mending divisions, of sacrifice in working in the ruins of damaged lives and hurt places, of continually witnessing to the holy places of spirit and truth and healing. We know that the spirit of God will bring us all back together to one another and grant us true peace. God’s spirit will prevail in our lives and in this world.

Thanks be to God and thanks be to Stephen Ministers.

